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ABSTRACT

For one instructor, learning that personal response, particularly emotions, had no place in the construction of a public self began in high school senior English class where students learned to never use personal pronouns in their writing. The lesson continued in college where she majored in journalism and literature under the direction of text-focused New Critics. However, required readings in a graduate seminar made impersonal criticism difficult, if not impossible. A search for different critical approaches introduced literary critics, feminist scholars, and compositionists who welcome the instruction of the personal into scholarship. Echoing social constructionists, these theorists and teachers question the detached, objective reader and researcher as valued model by showing why this role is impossible and even undesirable. The meaning of literary text is located in the reader's self and interpretive strategies. Personal, interactive reading can be messy, however, sabotaging efforts to produce carefully tailored prose. Practicing discourse diversity, writing autobiographically, is fraught with risks, especially for academic women--they risk not being heard in a climate that does not always value what women have to say. Remarks from student papers in a Composition 101 class offer anecdotal evidence that autobiographical writing options may not eliminate writing anxiety but can generate motivations that will allow students to transcend the "academic exercise" and experience writing and scholarship as personally meaningful and rewarding acts. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)

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# Practicing What She Preaches:

# A Graduate Student's Risky Crossing

# of Traditional Discourse Boundaries

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Sept. 22, 1993. My birthday. A graduate seminar, my first women's literature class. I am presenting a paper on Colette's *Break of Day*, a work that so deftly weaves together autobiographical and fictional material, narrative and monologue, that critics are often entangled in unresolvable debates about what to label it or how to read it, arguing about the centrality of its two main narratives, a romance story between the protagonist and her would-be lover and its mother-daughter plot. Instead of finding one of these plots as central, however, I argue that *Break of Day* illustrates a woman's response to the mid-life crisis. The book, I tell the class, exemplifies a re-definition of self that middle-aged women often undergo in the wake of changing or ended relationships, as described in Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice*. While reading Gilligan's description of the mourning and melancholia that can accompany women's mid-life transitions, I stop reading. Tears are forming in my eyes. The phrase – "my mother is dying" – had implanted itself into my consciousness. In that instant, the mother-daughter plot became central, in my subsequent readings of Colette's work and in my life.

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To be quite honest, I squirm every time I make public these revelations about myself as a student and a daughter. I grew up in the 1960's in a Self-denying family and culture, epitomized in my/our admiration of Jacqueline Kennedy's stoicism in the wake of her husband's assassination. At home, I was taught to keep my personal business at home and, to quote a grandmother, "never air your dirty laundry in public." At school, I and my classmates were routinely discouraged from indulging ourselves in inappropriate Self-expression, especially if it entailed what our principle termed PDA's, public displays of affection. Transgressing the rules usually meant a reprimand from him or, worse, a scathing indictment of our character from our senior English teacher, who routinely patrolled the halls. In her classrooms, we learned to never use personal pronouns in our writing. Of course, engaging in any public displays of self as a source of authority in our writing never became an issue. She trained me well for college, where I majored in journalism and studied literature under the direction of text-focused New Critics. Personal response, particularly emotions, had no place in my construction of a public self.

You can then perhaps understand my quandary in that graduate seminar. Although the professor and class members were understanding, I was not. In my eyes, I had committed a cardinal sin, as an academic and as a daughter. I struggled unsuccessfully all semester to distance myself from our required

readings, whose autobiographical elements and Self-conscious authors made impersonal criticism difficult if not impossible. Their stories illustrated too often and too well elements of my story and the stories of important women in my life. As a result, I discovered that semester that I needed a new way to read and write about literature that was personally relevant to the author and its readers.

My subsequent search for different critical approaches introduced me to literary critics, feminist scholars, and compositionists who welcome the intrusion of the personal into our scholarship. Echoing social constructionists, these theorists and teachers question the detached, objective reader and researcher as valued model by showing why this role is impossible and even undesirable. As literary critic Jane Tompkins demonstrates effectively in her essay "'Indians'," all accounts of scientific and historical facts are theory dependent; that is, they are indebted to the particularities of some scientist's or historian's epistemology and experience. Citing Stanley Fish's reader-response theory, she shows in another essay how the literary text is not a fixed object but, as she states, "a sequence of events that unfold within the reader's mind" (*Reader-Response* xvi-xvii). Its meaning is located in the individual reader's self and interpretive strategies. Thus, she holds, a critic's essential task is not to discover what a literary work means, but how readers make meaning (xvii).

These reader-response theories helped to explain my disturbing experience with Colette's *Break of Day*. Just as Fish and Tompkins theorized, I drew upon familiar interpretive strategies, learned early in my literary training, even though the strategies were inadequate for my present reading situation in which the boundaries between text, reader, and writer are deliberately blurred. Although I tried to read the book as if the boundaries were intact, I behaved much like the readers described by Louise Rosenblatt, another, early reader-response critic. I brought to my reading a combination of personality traits, memories, needs, and preoccupations that ultimately exploded my original interpretation and complicated my writing efforts.

As a result of these reading struggles, you could say that I experienced in my academic life what Lisa Albrecht has termed a "personal paradigm shift," as described in Lillian Bridwell-Bowles' essay "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy." The transformation, however, left me in a new quandary because I did not have a clue how to write about autobiographical writing for an academic audience, let alone effectively write myself into academic prose as these theorists were suggesting. Personal, interactive reading can be messy, and it can sabotage efforts to produce carefully

tailored prose. Yet Bridwell-Bowles and other literary and composition theorists make persuasive cases for cultivating students' personal voices and experience.

One of the most influential of these advocates, David Bleich, found that students' understanding of literature can be enhanced if they are allowed to explore their personal response and use this experiential knowledge, as he says, "to illuminate the significance or point of the story" (Beach 68). Bleich's research into students' ways of reading as well as the gender-related studies of Elizabeth Flynn and Patricinio Schweickart suggest that personal, interactive response models are particularly effective for women students because, as a group, they have demonstrated a "greater readiness to comment on the human relationships in the story and to enter into the experience offered by the narrative" (xxviii). Their recommendations for personal, dialogic reading response models are consistent with the findings and recommendations of psychological research conducted by Gilligan and that reported in *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule. The psychologists' combined research shows important links between our intellectual development, personal voice, and sense of identity. We now know, for example, that our ways of learning, solving problems, and communicating our needs and knowledge are connected to the way we primarily define ourselves and our responsibilities in relation to others.

These feminist epistemologies and research studies suggest that alternative discourse models will help enable all student voices, especially those of women not yet acculturated into the academy. As Bridwell-Bowles observes, our pluralistic society needs "new processes and forms if we are to express ways of thinking that have been outside the dominant culture" (349). She is joined by a distinguished list of compositionists and feminist authors seeking discourse diversity. Among them, Tompkins, Sally Miller Gearhart, Olivia Frey and Susan Meisenhelder have been especially passionate in their calls for alternatives to the academic writing staple, the argument, which they convincingly demonstrate does violence to readers and subject. Concerned that too much emphasis may be placed on private modes of writing, Meisenhelder recommends dialogic discourse models, which she says: "see reader and writer working toward shared meaning rather than writer foisting meaning on a passive and subservient reader"(192). These models, she suggests, will "foster the notion of writing as transformational – for both reader and writer" (192). Another scholar, Peter Elbow, is equally passionate and convincing in his call for discourse diversity in the essay "Reflections of Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." The essay urges

us to teach writing that "renders experience" as well as writing that explains, reminding us that the most basic impulse for writers is to tell stories and to give pleasure to readers (136). By learning how to translate their learning into their own language and experience, he says, students will develop the skills necessary to write good academic discourse.

Yet, practicing discourse diversity, writing autobiographically, is fraught with risks, especially for academic women. As another compositionist, Pamela Annas, has found, historically women writers have been "channeled toward private forms and denied access to more public forms" (369). In defying academic discourse conventions, she warns, they risk not being heard in "a climate that does not always value what women have to say" (362). The truth of her warnings has become apparent in my research and my experience, which has revealed that a different voice practicing discourse diversity may not only not be valued but also may be misunderstood even by those who wish to understand.

Nancy Mairs' Voi*ce Lessons. On Becoming a (Woman) / Writer* vividly demonstrates firsthand the consequences of this risk for academic women. In the prelude, Mairs recalls a review of her book by an anonymous reader, who observed: "'It is obvious from her [Mairs'] criticism that she wasn't meant to be an academic, from her encounter with French feminist theory, that she wasn't cut out for a career as a critic. What is obvious is that she is a real writer" (3). Had she not had more pressing concerns, Mairs says, she would have "wept in response" to this criticism, which she notes, 'reimposed the very dichotomies" her book was challenging. The experience prompted her to half humorously wonder: "Is there a God in the Academy creating academics in His own image and dispensing careers according to some holy plan?" (3).

*Voice Lessons* suggests there is and there isn't. Recording Mairs' experiences as a Ph.D. student and college instructor as well as her efforts to become a woman/writer, *Voice Lessons* concretely demonstrates that Mairs has made a career within the academy. At the same time, the book reveals that she risks being misunderstood and dismissed as "nonacademic" because she does not write traditional academic prose.

Her story sends me back to my struggles as a graduate teaching assistant trying to become – and to teach others how to become – the academic/writer. It reminds me of the questions that arose when I tried to harness my personal response and write experimentally about Colette's autobiomythography; it reminds me of the questions that arise when I read and comment on the autobiographical discourse of my literature

and composition students. How does one write autobiographically without appearing too personal, emotional, narcissistic? How does one critique autobiographical material without appearing to criticize the autobiographer? What happens to the inexperienced student/ writer, entangled in the messy details of personal experience, or the uncredentialed, untenured colleague who must be published? Is it worth risking grades and academic advancement to produce alternative discourse when the unconventional is still labeled "nonacademic" and may not be understood?

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A postscript. On June 19, 1994, my mother died. I reluctantly write of her death in this postscript, not because I consider it as peripheral but because it is central to the story of my quandary as a graduate teaching assistant. In the months prior to her death, I continued to write, think, and read about Colette's book as I helped care for my mother. At the same time that I was learning how Colette's works exemplified Cixous's notion of *l'ecriture feminine,* writing the body, I was becoming adept at reading my mother's body for signs of her needs. I discovered upon reflection that I was learning during those months how to read and write our lives, individually and in tandem. As a result, my view of Colette's *Break of Day* was transformed. Today I read it as a writer's/daughter's story of her difficult but rewarding transformation into a confident, articulate and creative, woman/writer, thanks in part to her recollections of her mother's self-affirming lifestyle and discourse. I could not have reached this understanding of the book without the complications of my personal life urging me to foreground the book's mother-daughter plot.

Equally important for me, however, is the transformation this academic exercise caused in my reading of my life and my mother's. While reading and writing about Colette's tribute to her mother for my course paper, I was jolted out of a state of denial about my mother's illness and glimpsed, before it was too late, the loss that I would suffer. As a result, I discovered the significance of her life, and in due course together we found a "mother lode" of women's friendship and culture. To say the least, I discovered that truly meaningful scholarship can not be – at least for me -- just "academic exercise."

Since those personal revelations, my teaching has been transformed. I have a greater awareness of what it means to ask students to write personal response essays. I no longer view personal writing as necessary academic stepping stones to be crossed and abandoned, once we learn how to write real (translate impersonal/argumentative/critical) academic essays. Nor do I automatically view autobiographical writing

and other writing alternatives as representing or expressing less rigorous scholarship. A student in my women's literature class last spring wrote in her journal that she put more time and effort in writing the alternative option paper for class than she had done in any prior papers because she became obsessed with the paper as she explored her personal responses to the work. The end result, she said, was a paper that was both "meaningful and fun." Another student in the same class, likewise, demonstrated extraordinary effort in preparing his alternative class project. Creating a film adaptation of a short story we had discussed in class, he not only included the required description and interpretation of his adaptation as it related to the original story, but he included a detailed screen play and a complete tape-recording of the music he would include in its soundtrack since music played a significant symbolic function in the original story. Both of these students demonstrated efforts that exceeded the assignment requirements; both revealed that their investment in the project was indebted to personal motivations beyond the classroom project.

These revelations have, likewise, been at the root of a transformation in my composition course design and assignments, which have revealed most dramatically to me the risks and benefits of autobiographical writing assignments for new writers and their teachers/readers. Occasionally, for example, I encounter the student (usually a female) who insists on writing about an emotionally traumatic subject such as childhood sexual abuse or spouse abuse, which require me to dodge the role of therapist as I undertake the uncomfortable task of coaching this writing effort. Invariably I encounter students (usually younger students) who feel intimidated or bored by autobiographical topics, unable to find the interesting and significant in their lives. Increasingly I find students who have had prior experience with personal writing and express a "been there, done that" resistance to tackling another. For these students and situations, I have learned to be flexible and open to writing alternatives that will be acceptable to both of us. I am also learning to set out the broad parameters of a writing assignment/topic and then let the students take responsibility for choosing a writing topic within those parameters, even if they choose what I fear will be a risky, unsuitable topic. As one literature student noted in her journal before undertaking what she viewed as a risky writing option, even a failure can bring important lessons.

In the wake of all these challenges, however, I have also encountered students (usually women returning to school after a long hiatus) who benefit from autobiographical writing options, as Bridwell-Bowles predicted. Routinely at least one student will enter the classroom stating unequivocally that "I

cannot write" but will leave expressing confidence in not only her writing abilities but also her academic ambitions. Already this semester one of my English 101 students has shown such a benefit. At the beginning of the semester the student, a middle-aged woman from rural Kentucky, expressed doubts that she belonged in college. Recently this student submitted a reflective letter with her third paper that reveals that in the midst of her insecurity an emerging sense of self-confidence and purpose in her writing that is connected to her finding a meaning and usefulness for her course work beyond our classroom. In the letter she writes:

> This paper was hard to write for me. I started it over several times, wishing I had chosen someone else to write about. But now that it is finished I'm glad I did it, as I think it goes along with my other papers. I hope you like it, and I will be looking forward to your comments, and suggestions on revision. If you like this paper I think I will revise it for the portfolio. I want to make a family history, and use the revised versions of these papers in that. It is just for my kids I want to do this. Things change so fast that sometimes a few short years seems like a different world. I want them to know how it was then, and to put on paper some of the stories my mom told about people she knew growing up."

These remarks offer anecdotal evidence that autobiographical writing options may not eliminate writing anxiety but it can generate motivations that will allow our students to transcend the "academic exercise" and experience writing and scholarship as personally meaningful and rewarding acts.

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